



Political Blogs

by Claude J. Summers

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Journalist Rex Wockner is one of several prominent gay political bloggers. Photograph by Mike Tidmus. Image appears under the the Creative Commons Attribution ShareAlike 3.0 license.

One of the most significant manifestations of grassroots activism by glbtq communities in the new millennium has been the proliferation of political blogs focused on gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender issues. The explosion of glbtq political blogs in the twenty-first century has served to multiply greatly the number of voices participating in glbtq activism and to expedite the transmission of political information and analysis to glbtq communities.

Definitions

The term *blog* is a contraction of "Web log." A type of website that features text and images (including videos), a blog is a form of Internet publication that usually aspires to creating an online community or to participating in one. Usually, a blog is updated regularly, with entries displayed in reverse-chronological order. Blogs also usually facilitate interactivity and community by allowing readers to comment on the entries and engage in conversation with each other as well as with the writer. They also usually provide links to related blogs, sometimes called a "Blog Roll," so that readers can easily navigate from one blog to another.

The term *blog* is also used to refer to the piece (or collectively, pieces) of writing posted on a Web log, and it is also used as a verb: to blog means to write for a Web log. A *blogger* is someone who writes blogs.

Harking back to the origins of the modern blog in online diaries in which students and others posted accounts of their daily lives, many blogs are intensely personal, functioning almost as a running account of a writer's private life and thoughts. Others, however, provide commentary on specific topics, such as film or sports, or on current events or culture. Some blogs are maintained on large websites, with bloggers functioning much as columnists or op-ed writers do in print newspapers and magazines, while other blogs are independent expressions of an individual or group interested in a particular subject, often published on dedicated Web hosting services.

Facilitated by the development of easy-to-use software in the late 1990s, blogging exploded in the early years of the twenty-first century. The number of blogs maintained worldwide is staggering, now exceeding one hundred million.

Political blogging in the United States had become widespread enough, and had attracted enough readers, to become a significant factor in the 2004 and 2006 national elections. By 2008, the "blogosphere" (a term coined to denote the collective community of blogs) had become varied and large enough to serve as an important gauge of public interest in particular issues and an important factor in the Presidential election. The Obama campaign proved especially adroit in using blogs successfully in the 2008 campaign.

Some political blogs are written by well-known public figures, others by self-effacing, almost anonymous posters. Some blogs are off-shoots of mainstream media (as when newspapers or television networks and stations or prominent journalists maintain blogs), while others conceive themselves in opposition to

mainstream media, attempting to highlight issues neglected by those media or to approach them from a different vantage point. Some are written to advance particular ideologies and are posted on sites dedicated to specific issues or viewpoints, while others function largely to share information rather than to shape opinion.

GLBTQ Political Blogs

In March 2008, a Harris Interactive and Witeck-Combs Communications poll revealed a substantially higher percentage of reading, posting, and commenting on blogs by gay and lesbian adults than by heterosexual adults. The survey found that 51% of glbtq users of the Web regularly read blogs as opposed to 36% of heterosexuals. More narrowly focused, the survey discovered that 23% of glbtq users of the Web regularly followed political blogs as compared to 14% of heterosexuals. In addition, 27% of gay men and lesbians had commented on a blog within a month of the survey as compared to 13% of heterosexuals. Moreover, 21% of gay men and lesbians said that they had themselves written a blog within the last month as compared with 7% of heterosexuals surveyed.

These statistics indicate not only that blogging is more common among gay men and lesbians than among heterosexuals, but that blogs are significant in expressing and shaping glbtq political opinion. While the Internet has profoundly affected communication generally, it has had a particularly important impact on glbtq people. Through the Internet, sexual minorities have been able to forge virtual communities in which they are able to network with like-minded individuals and in which they are able to express themselves directly in ways that they are frequently denied in "real" life.

There are several hundred glbtq political blogs of varying degrees of influence. Taken cumulatively, glbtq political blogs offer an amazingly diverse range of opinion, while also providing the opportunity for individuals to engage in participatory journalism both as bloggers and as commenters on blogs.

Because so many glbtq political blogs are linked to each other, the gay blogosphere has become an echoing chamber in which blogs have the potential to reach large audiences and sometimes to make local stories into national ones. A story posted on one blog often goes "viral" when it is picked up by other blogs and reposted on still more.

The power of the glbtq blogosphere to mobilize direct action quickly was illustrated powerfully at the end of 2008, when Amy Balliett and Willow Witte on their blog *JoinTheImpact.com* issued a call on November 7 to protest the passage of Proposition 8, which banned same-sex marriage in California. The call, which spread like wildfire through the Internet, was answered dramatically. On November 15, demonstrations in support of glbtq equality were held in over 300 American cities.

Similarly, local stories frequently become national stories once they enter the glbtq blogosphere. For example, in June 2009, the hosts of a small Sacramento, California radio program made disparaging comments about transgender children, seemingly advocating violence against them. The reaction in glbtq communities was both swift and resolute. Quickly spreading through the blogosphere, the story led to threatened boycotts of the show's sponsors and the withdrawal of sponsorship by many of the radio station's advertisers. After initially refusing to apologize, the radio DJs ultimately issued a complete apology and even hosted a show with transgender advocates.

Also in June 2009, the raid of a gay bar by the Fort Worth Police Department and the Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission on the eve of the fortieth anniversary of Stonewall, in which a young man was seriously injured and other patrons hurt, harassed, and humiliated, also attracted national attention as the result of the outrage that spread through the blogosphere. When the Fort Worth Police Chief attempted to excuse the brutality of the officers and the agents by claiming that they had been groped by the patrons of

the bar, the anger of the glbtq communities exploded. In his popular *Savage Love* blog (*slog.thestranger.com*), gay journalist Dan Savage pointed out that the police chief had invoked the classic "Gay Panic Defense."

The spread of the story from blog to blog resulted in very bad publicity for Fort Worth, including stories in the *New York Times* and other mainstream media, as well as thousands of letters and e-mails protesting the raid. The Police Chief quickly changed his tactic of blaming the victims, and multiple investigations of the incident were launched.

The new technology is particularly potent because it makes possible both instant communication and vivid imagery. Videos, in particular, are able to convey events with an immediacy that mere descriptions usually cannot.

For example, in August 2009, after the El Paso, Texas City Council voted to provide benefits to the domestic partners of city employees, some twenty-five pastors, churchgoers, and "angry citizens" showed up at a city council meeting to denounce the new policy as an "abomination" and "a slap in the face of God." Following their rants, an elderly woman, Ms. Lisa Turner, stood up to condemn the preaching of hate and was roundly heckled for doing so. The encounter might have merited a paragraph or two in a local El Paso newspaper, but someone videotaped the meeting. When the video was posted on gay political blogs, Ms. Turner became an instant hero and the religious protestors were exposed for their lack of civility.

Glbtc political blogs are as various as political blogs in general. Some of them are focused on a particular issue, such as marriage equality, while others are focused more widely; some present a particular ideology, while others consciously seek a wide range of perspectives.

There are far too many glbtq political blogs and bloggers to mention them all in this brief survey, and the ones that are mentioned are intended to be representative rather than necessarily the best of the gay political blogs, but they may be categorized in a number of ways. For example, some bloggers post on their own sites, while others post on larger sites, such as glbtq news sites or general sites that include glbtq perspectives. Some bloggers comment on glbtq news generally, while others limit themselves to particular interests or specialties.

Prominent Bloggers

Among the most prominent gay political bloggers are individuals who have earned distinction for their political commentary or experience in the political arena or in the news media long before they began their blogging.

For example, Andrew Sullivan, former editor of *The New Republic* and current editor of *The Atlantic*, whose *Daily Dish* blog appears on *The Atlantic* website (*Andrew Sullivan.theatlantic.com*), blogs about politics and news generally, but as an openly gay man, he frequently offers trenchant insight into glbtq issues. Known as a "thinking man's conservative," Sullivan proclaims his independence: "of no party or clique" is the motto on the *Daily Dish* masthead. One example of Sullivan's ability to make his points succinctly and memorably is when he observed in reference to President Obama's neglect of the promises he made to the glbtq community in the 2008 campaign that the "fierce urgency of now" has morphed into "the fierce urgency of whenever."

Keith Boykin, a former official in the Clinton administration who edits *The Daily Voice* website, which aspires to be the leading destination for African American news and opinion, also maintains a blog, *keithboykin.com*, in which he addresses political and social issues. Like Sullivan's, Boykin's interests are not exclusively glbtq politics, but he frequently addresses gay issues. An articulate and insightful writer, he

brings to his commentary the perspective of an openly gay African American who has had extensive experience in politics.

David Mixner, a political strategist and fundraiser perhaps best known as a "friend of Bill [Clinton]" who ultimately broke with him for his neglect of gay rights issues, maintains a blog entitled *Live from Turkey Hollow* at *DavidMixner.com*. Mixner, who brings a wealth of political experience and savvy to his blog, writes about a number of progressive issues, but most frequently about the glbtq movement for equality. He has emerged as a fierce critic of the Obama administration's failure to fulfill its promises to the glbtq community, particularly on repealing Don't Ask, Don't Tell and the Defense of Marriage Act. He has been an equally fierce critic of the timidity of the gay movement establishment organizations.

Another leading blogger is John Aravosis, editor of *Americablog.com*, the progressive news blog. He and David Sudbay and Jason Rosenbaum blog regularly on gay issues there. Aravosis is a political consultant who specializes in using the Internet for politics. His political insights are often expressed in pithy, sometimes biting, observations. In addition to commenting on current events, his blog also frequently reports breaking news from Washington.

Rex Wockner, an accomplished reporter who has specialized in gay news for 25 years, also both comments and reports on his blog, *Wockner* (*wockner.blogspot.com*). One distinction of Wockner's blog is his interest in international as well as national news. He also reports and comments on local San Diego news.

Andy Towle, former editor of *Genre*, established the widely-read and influential blog *Towleroad* (*www.towleroad.com*) in 2003. While *Towleroad* includes blogs about entertainment and culture as well as glbtq news, the emphasis is on the latter. The blog is notable for the prevalence of videos and for featuring stories from obscure sources, as well as for breaking news.

Kate Clinton's blog *Communicate* (*www.kateclinton.com*) is, as one might expect from the pioneering lesbian comedian, sometimes laugh-out-loud funny. But Clinton is a political junkie and her humor is often based on current events. Hence, her blog frequently expresses her take on politics. Her postings--including especially her videos--are amusing, but they are also frequently illuminating as well.

With a decade's experience as an editor of gay publications including the *Washington Blade* and the *Houston Voice*, Chris Crain launched his blog *Citizen Crain* (*citizenchris.typepad.com*) in 2006. *Citizen Crain* is distinguished by intelligent and informed commentary. Crain is also editor of *GayNewsWatch* (*www.gaynewswatch.com*), a site that gathers glbtq news and blogs from across the web.

Veteran journalist Karen Ocamb, Los Angeles-based news editor at *Frontiers Magazine*, maintains *lgbtpov.com*, which offers both original reporting and astute political analysis, as well as other information of interest to glbtq readers. The blog is especially informative on California news and personalities.

New Bloggers

Some bloggers on glbtq political issues are not known for their personal experience as political analysts or journalists, but have emerged recently as astute commenters on glbtq issues. They may be said to exemplify a new activism in the glbtq movement for equality.

Pam Spaulding, for example, an African American lesbian with roots in New York City and North Carolina, established her blog, *Pam's House Blend: An Online Magazine in the Reality-based Community* (*www.pamshouseblend.com*) in 2004 primarily to vent her frustrations over "the anti-gay state of the political landscape" and the faith-based attack on glbtq rights. Since then, it has grown into one of the most visited and trusted of glbtq political blogs.

Although Spaulding's personal vision dominates her site, guest bloggers on *Pam's House Blend* represent other perspectives as well. These guest bloggers include Autumn Sandeen, a transgender activist; Daimeon, a young gay man; Julien Sharp, a lesbian marriage-equality activist; "Radical Russ" Belville, a straight-but-not-narrow Oregonian; and Terrance Heath, an African-American gay activist from Washington, D. C. In 2006, Spaulding received a Monette-Horwitz Award for her work in helping combat homophobia.

Joe Jervis launched his *Joe.My.God* blog (www.joemygod.blogspot.com/) in 2003. Passionate and frequently humorous, Jervis has attracted a large audience for his ruminations about gay politics and news. Although reporting from New York, Jervis is well known for bringing to the fore local news from well beyond New York and Washington.

The Boiled Frog Blog at *Tips-Q* (www.tips-q.com/articles) also offers interesting and cogent comment on news stories and political developments. Blogger David Hart is especially adept at eviscerating anti-gay activists and religious hypocrites and at explaining the significance of stories that might have gone unnoted in the glbtq media.

Jeremy Hooper founded *Good As You (G-A-Y)* (goodasyou.org) in 2005, when he was twenty-five years old, in order to challenge the pervasive anti-gay rhetoric in the media and to initiate "a fresh, new, irreverent approach" to gay activism. His tone is light rather than angry; he avoids calling anti-gay activists "bigots"; and generally approaches the news more positively than negatively. On the other hand, he allows anti-gay activists to expose themselves simply by quoting their lies and inconsistencies.

On July 7, 2009, Hooper posted, under the rubric, "This is what marriage equality looks like," photos and videos of his June wedding in Connecticut. The images of the happy male couple surrounded by a large and supportive group of family and friends make a powerful case in favor of marriage equality.

Another youthful activist is responsible for the Canadian blog *Slap Upside the Head* (www.slapupsidethehead.com). Described as a gay rights and anti-homophobia blog, the site features comments on news items that irritate Mark (no last name given) because they are stupidly anti-gay or delight him because they are not stupidly anti-gay. The site is unusual for a political blog because it does not permit comments.

In addition to *JoinTheImpact.com*, mentioned above, other blogs were spawned by the passage of Proposition 8 in California. Among the new bloggers stirred into activism by the defeat in California are David Badash of *The New Civil Rights Movement* (www.thenewcivilrightsmovement.com) and David Yale Mailloux of *Dym Sum* (dym-sum.com). They became bloggers to protest the injustices glbtq people face throughout the country. Badash and Mailloux have a special interest in marriage equality, but they comment on glbtq news stories generally. They help promote events such as a national kiss-in to protest the arrest of young men in Salt Lake City for kissing on land owned by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

News Sites and Group Blogs

News sites, whether individual online newspapers (including online versions of glbtq newspapers) or aggregate sites that publish news from around the Web, frequently feature bloggers who provide commentary on specific news items or more general remarks.

The two most popular glbtq news sites, *Advocate.com* and *365gay.com* prominently feature blogs. While *Advocate.com* tends to present a large number of occasional bloggers, and to feature blogs by well known figures such as Michelangelo Signorile and Dan Savage (both of whom maintain their own websites), *365gay.com* hosts a stable of regular bloggers who represent a range of viewpoints.

For example, on *365gay.com* New Yorker James Withers writes from the perspective of an urban African

American gay male and Cody Daigle, of Lafayette, Louisiana, writes from his experience as an openly gay man living in a conservative medium-size city. In their blogs on *365gay.com*, Lisa Neff often addresses family and youth issues; John Corvino emphasizes ethical questions; Emma Ruby-Sachs analyzes legal matters; Wayne Besen, an expert on the ex-gay movement, who also maintains his own website, writes frequently about religious issues; Ali Davis, who often reports on Rachel Maddow's television show, also comments on news topics, as does *365gay.com* editor, Jennifer Vanasco.

Launched in 2008, the news site *GayAgenda.com* features a section entitled "Voices from the Blogosphere." Selected by the *GayAgenda.com* news team, the blogs that are included are on glbtq topics and sometimes on political issues, but they are not necessarily from glbtq sources. Including non-glbtq comments on gay political issues sometimes yields fresh perspectives.

Also launched in 2008, *GayPolitics.com* includes news and commentary on glbtq issues. A project of the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund, which is dedicated to increasing the number of openly gay and lesbian elected officials, *GayPolitics.com* provides news about candidates and officials and campaigns, as well as interviews with endorsed candidates, in addition to more general glbtq political news and commentary.

The large aggregated news site, *The Huffington Post (huffingtonpost.com)*, founded by Arianna Huffington, and Kenneth Lerer, features a number of gay political bloggers. Founded in 2005, as a liberal alternative to conservative news sites such as *The Drudge Report*, *The Huffington Post* routinely publishes gay political comment by such occasional contributors as Harvey Fierstein, Joan Garry, Isobel White, John Ridley, and many others.

A California communications specialist, and one-half of one of the 18,000 same-sex couples who were married in the Golden State before Proposition 8, White is a particularly engaging writer who is able to make vividly personal the issue of same-sex marriage. Similarly, Joan Garry, former executive director of GLAAD, who also blogs on her own site (*www.joangarry.com*), and for *The Washington Blade (washingtonblade.com)*, often focuses on issues that affect her own family.

Originally founded by Bil Browning in 2004 but relaunched nationally in 2007, the *Bilerico Project: An Experiment in LGBTQ (www.bilerico.com)* is the Web's largest glbtq group blog, now featuring over 50 distinct bloggers who address all sorts of issues from a variety of perspectives. While news and politics are not the Project's exclusive subjects, they tend to predominate, as the blogs are often written in response to current events. What is most interesting about the site is the diversity of its contributors, many of whom are young activists outside large gay centers.

Another group blog is *Lez Get Real: A Gay Girl's View on the World (lezgetreal.com)*. Featuring dozens of regular and guest bloggers of all ages and circumstances, the site offers commentary on politics, issues, and events that affect the glbtq communities. Although the bloggers reflect lesbian perspectives, the audience is conceived as "everyone" on the theory that everyone can benefit from "a gay girl's view on the world."

The *Trans Group Blog (transgroupblog.blogspot.com/)* gathers a variety of voices from within the trans community. Commenting on news and sharing information, bloggers such as Jennifer Finney Boylan, Marti Abernathy, Lena Dahlstrom, and many others discuss trans issues and offer trans perspectives on political and cultural topics.

The Independent Gay Forum (www.indegayforum.org) posts blogs (often originally published elsewhere) from gay conservative contributors, such as Bruce Bawer, John Corvino, Dale Carpenter, James Kirchick, Eric Marcus, Jennifer Vanasco, and Norah Vincent. The Forum's goal is to support the inclusion of gays and lesbians in civil society, while rejecting "progressive" claims that gays and lesbians should support radical

social change.

The progressive blog *Change.org* includes a separate section on gay rights (*gayrights.change.org*) presided over by Michael A. Jones, the communications director for the Human Rights Program at Harvard University. In addition to commentary on the news, the site urges readers to take action on particular projects each week.

Specialized Blogs

Some blogs specialize in a particular subject rather than in glbtq politics generally. For example, a number of blogs concentrate on marriage equality. These range from *UniteTheFight!* (www.unitethefight.org), which in addition to posting original commentary on the subject usefully brings together a great deal of information from all over the Web about marriage equality; and *Proposition 8 and the Right to Marry* (prop8legalcommentary.blogspot.com/), which is maintained by law librarian Michael Gonsberg; to *susanberland* (susanberland.yolasite.com/), the blog of a marriage activist and mother of a gay son from San Rafael, California.

The Servicemen's Legal Defense Network sponsors *Frontlines*, *The SLDN Blog* (www.sldn.org/blog), on which many members of the network blog about the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy and its prospects for repeal.

Among the most useful specialized political blogs is Dana Rudolph's *Mombian* (www.mombian.com). Rudolph founded *Mombian* in 2005 in order to provide "sustenance" to lesbian mothers by providing parenting advice, book reviews, and political news and commentary related to gay and lesbian parenting.

Another specialized blog is *MyOutSprit.com* (gayspirituality.typepad.com), founded in 2004 as *Gay Spirituality & Culture* to help create a shift in gay culture toward greater self-love, wisdom, affirmation, and spirituality. Inasmuch as gay spiritual concerns also often have political dimensions, many of the bloggers on *MyOutSprit.com* comment on political as well as religious questions.

Chris Geidner's blog *Law Dork* (lawdork.net/) and Nan Hunter's blog *hunter of justice* (hunterforjustice.typepad.com/hunter_of_justice/) concentrate on legal subjects. Geidner is an attorney who writes about judicial appointments and lawsuits among other issues; Hunter is a lesbian activist and professor at Georgetown University Law School who is interested in the intersections of sexuality and gender and the law.

Another legal blog is the *Sexual Orientation and the Law Blog* (lawprofessors.typepad.com/lgbtlaw/). Edited by law professors Sara Benson and Steve Sanders, this blog is a treasure trove of information and ideas about legal issues in which sexual orientation figures directly or indirectly.

Immigration Equality Blog (www.immigrationequality.org/blog/) focuses on achieving equality for glbtq and HIV-positive individuals and couples under American immigration law.

Dr. Jillian T. Weiss maintains an informative blog focused on transgender issues in the workplace, *Transgender Workplace Diversity: The Law, Politics, and Public Issues of Transgender Workplace Diversity* (transworkplace.blogspot.com/).

Mike Rogers's *blogActive: Direct Action Tools from D. C.* (www.bioactive.com) may also be considered a specialized blog. Rogers, who is featured in Kirby Dick's documentary *Outrage* (2009), specializes in exposing hypocrisy among government officials, especially politicians who vote against glbtq rights while

surreptitiously pursuing gay sex. Although Rogers comments on general glbtq issues and news, he clearly most relishes exposing the hypocrisy of moralistic politicians.

Conclusion

The proliferation of glbtq political blogs says something about the thirst glbtq people have for information about their lives and issues, information that is not always forthcoming from mainstream news sources. While it is true that glbtq issues are now covered more often as general news than they previously were, the coverage of these issues by the mainstream media is often biased or uninformed. Hence, the need for specialized news services and commentary is as imperative as ever, and the glbtq political blogs help meet this continuing need.

This proliferation is also a manifestation of grassroots (or 'netroots) activism. It probably indicates a widespread desire for a decentralized, bottom-up approach to advancing the glbtq movement, especially in light of the fact that many blogs were launched in the aftermath of the passage of California's Proposition 8, a loss that is widely blamed on the apparent ineptness of professional political experts and established organizations. Indeed, whether merited or not, the political blogs express over and over again a lack of faith in the ability of established organizations such as the Human Rights Campaign or Equality California to achieve the goals of the movement.

The growth of the gay political blogosphere also reflects the new popularity of participatory journalism. At a time when established journalism is under attack for a lack of objectivity and for ideological slants of various kinds, participatory journalism not only offers citizens an opportunity for self-expression, but the new tools of the Internet also allow their voices to be disseminated widely and with an immediacy not heretofore possible.

Perhaps most profoundly, however, blogging on the Internet creates the kind of community that most glbtq people can not find in their "real" lives, especially if they do not live in centers of gay activism. The new media and tools make it possible to communicate directly and quickly with others of a like mind or similar interests, and thereby create communities that may be "virtual" but nevertheless deeply satisfying. The creation of these communities make possible a new kind of political activism, one that may be able to bridge many of the divisions that separate our extraordinarily diverse communities.

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